

FIRST LESSON: Micah 3:9-12
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 23:1-12
November 5, 2023

“Beware of Arrogance and Hypocrisy”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Human arrogance sometimes knows no bounds, but it can occasionally be funny. A group from an organization for Mensa members, you know, those people with an IQ in the top 2% of the population, got together for lunch one day. They were all intent on proving how smart they were to one another, and so when they sat down and they discovered that the salt shaker contained pepper and the pepper shaker contained salt they set about determining how to swap the contents without spilling anything. They came up with what they considered several ingenious methods and were very proud of themselves. They then called the waitress over ready to show off and dazzle her with their brilliance.

“Miss,” one them said, “the pepper shaker contains salt and the salt shaker contains pepper . . .” but before anyone could launch into one of the inspired solutions she replied, “Oh, sorry about that,” leaned over the table, unscrewed the caps of both bottles and switched them.

There was dead silence at the Mensa table.

When we find him today Jesus has finally finished debating with all of his opponents, and now he addresses the crowds of ordinary people, saying, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.” The Pharisees, Jesus alleges, were both arrogant and hypocritical. But his accusation does feel a bit odd, because on the surface it would appear that the Pharisees and teachers of the law DO practice what they preach.

The Pharisees were known for their devotion to the Law. They tithed everything, right down to their herbs. Their goal was to bring the practices of purification necessary for the Temple into everyday life. As a result, they were strongly focused on avoiding ritual defilement. This is why Jesus’ imaginary Pharisee in the parable of the Good Samaritan passed by the injured man on the road. Contact with the man would have made him ritually impure.

Jesus recognized the authority of the Pharisees as those who “sit on Moses’ seat,” but with reservations. When they actually cited the scriptures that was acceptable. The Pharisees did not tell people it was okay to lie, cheat, steal and kill. But Jesus had a problem when they relied on their own interpretation which included the oral law. The oral law could sometimes provide a “way out” of obeying the actual written law. It also could tie people up

in legalistic knots. Jesus did not acknowledge the authority of the oral law. Neither did the Sadducees, but it is the Pharisees who survived, and it is that form of Judaism with all of its commentaries and interpretations that exists today, although that does not mean that their modern-day heirs share the behavior Jesus was criticizing. Jesus described the actions of these men this way: “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.”

We don’t know enough about the practices of the Pharisees in the 1st century to know if they kept kosher in the way that modern Jews who are both strict about such things and have the material ability to do so do, but it is hard to tell someone that they must have two sets of dishes, when they may not even have one. It is impossible for the poor to keep up with the level ritual handwashing required when they are working 12 hours a day just to survive and eat another day. It was not possible for ordinary people to avoid dead bodies and sickness. The way that the Pharisees interpreted how the Sabbath was to be observed was next to impossible for people of means, let alone the poor. We know some of these things because the oral law was finally written down as the Mishnah and later commentary came in the two talmuds. These are the burdens Jesus spoke of. The Pharisees had “upped the ante” by expanding the requirements for Temple priests to everyone. And they broke down every general command into tiny specific parts to determine what was sin and what was not sin. Carrying anything weighing more than a fig on the sabbath constituted sin. Allowing rainwater to collect was not sin, but collecting water that poured off a building was. I have no idea why. HEALING someone on the sabbath was a sin because that constituted work! If a bandage fell off on the sabbath you were not allowed to replace it until the sabbath was over. These men of leisure spent hours debating the finer points of the law and instead of offering help they created burdens, and then condemned those unable to abide by their teaching.

Many of the Pharisees of Jesus day saw the common people as hopeless. They spent their days debating because they had the material wealth that enabled them to do so. They told the people what to do. They didn’t put themselves in the place of a poor person trying to accomplish the impossible. As Jesus said, they didn’t “lift a finger” to help them.

Jesus’ second critique of the Pharisees had to do with their desire for prestige. Instead of being servants to those around them, interpreting the law and guiding the needy, they used their role for self-aggrandizement. Jesus said, “They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

Phylacteries are boxes with scriptures inside of them tied around the forehead and arm. We most often only see them in Israel itself. Prayer shawls are more familiar to us, as well as fringes, because of the neighborhood we live in. It is not the practices that Jesus attacks, but their motivation. The motivation was to show off. The phylacteries were extra-large. The fringe was extra-long and wide. The desire was for attention and honor. It would be like a Christian evangelist wearing an absolutely enormous cross and carrying a well-

thumbed bible around with him everywhere. To us this sounds strange because our society has become so secular, but the rabbis were among the most powerful and financially well-off people in Israel. This was clearly about status. And it is more than likely that not all Pharisees DID live the way they promoted. Human nature dictates that if there is an “in group” to belong to there will be some that go along for the ride. There are always wolves in sheep’s clothing. These are the men who liked to be greeted respectfully in the marketplace and who took the seats of honor at banquets and in the synagogue. In the typical synagogue of the day the only seating was often a wide ledge around the front and they would have taken these seats. Most people either had to stand or sit on the floor.

Jesus then laid out a different set of rules, ones that Christians have managed to ignore for centuries. “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Human nature and the drive for status and power is strong. It was tragically not long at all before Christianity managed to create its own hierarchies. Roman Catholic and Episcopal priests are called “father” by their flocks. The word “pope” is a version of “papa” meaning “father.” And even Presbyterians, who go out of their way to avoid titles that confer status, have done so. Did you know that technically speaking I am the “Reverend Doctor Farrell”? *Seriously, who is that person?* We may not have a bishop, but we do have an “Executive Presbyter.” A few years ago the PCUSA attempted to make a theological statement by referring to pastors as “Preaching and teaching elders” and elders as “ruling elders.” Everyone was so confused by it that it was eventually dropped. But the important thing is this: the kingdom of God does not operate by the same rules as the kingdom of this world. In God’s kingdom the last shall be first, and the greatest among us is a servant. Our challenge is to resist the value system that is all around us, and truly understand that we are all equal in the sight of God. The CEO is NOT actually superior to the homeless person on the street. Human status is an illusion, and it does not translate from this world to the next.

Jesus calls us to turn away from the type of ambition we are encouraged to pursue every day in our world. We are taught to fight our way to the top. We are taught that status matters, that the “boss” is more important than the employee, that the person with a PhD is far superior to the one with a GED. But it’s all window dressing. A person’s real worth is in the heart. This is wonderfully freeing. Those who wish to lord their superior status over us lose their power to do so when we’re not impressed. And when we open our hearts to the gifts of all people, we are all blessed. Amen

Micah 3:9-12

⁹ Hear this, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel,
who despise justice
and distort all that is right;
¹⁰ who build Zion with bloodshed,
and Jerusalem with wickedness.
¹¹ Her leaders judge for a bribe,
her priests teach for a price,
and her prophets tell fortunes for money.
Yet they look for the Lord's support and say,
"Is not the Lord among us?
No disaster will come upon us."
¹² Therefore because of you,
Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

Matthew 23:1-12

²³ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:² "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

⁵ "Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.

⁸ "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.